

## [We Eat Good]

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We Eat Good

Joe [Lavallo?] has a sign in his field. A white-washed plank nailed to a broom handle [noses?] up above the yellow of [buttercups?] and reads- Joe Lavallo. Beries for Sale \$.20. Pick them Yourself, \$.15.

The July sun is hot. Burning hot. Joe Lavallo sits on the running board or [his?] car, blotting his wet, leathery face with a big blue handkerchief. Ten feet away is his woodshed lean-to, a shaded spot under a giant spruce where [Joe?] could sit in the comforting cool. But from there he would not be able to watch the Connecticut couple who are bending over the berry plants taking advantage of the Pick them Yourself, \$.15.

A bee drones dully around Joe's ear. He slaps at it lazily with a damp, calloused palm. "The old lady says I'm a damfool. Dunno but maybe she's right. I try to spare myself a lotta hard work in the sun by chargin' 'em a nickel less to pick 'em themselves, but dam' if 'tain't just as hot sittin' here watchin' 'em.

"There's them that don't need [wate in'?]," Joe admitted, "but give some a chance and they'll steal the heart out of you. My God, I know. Last week three girls drove up. From Marshfield they said. They give me a dollar and I tell 'em to go ahead and pick, I'd be

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along with the change. Pretty soon I hear the girls tootin' the horn 2 for their change. They'd filled their baskets heapin' high. That's all right. Let 'em fill 'em as high as they want. I'd do the same. But then I spy two of those colored handkerchief things they'd been wearin' round their heads, layin' on the floor they was, bulgin' with berries and leakin' juice t'beat hell. Well, they was all squashed anyway, so I let it go. But I wanted to let 'em know I was wise. When they drove away I yelled[.?] 'It's the first time I've had three sneakin' female berry thieves in my patch all t'once.' I gotta kick out of seein' their faces red up."

Joe was keeping his eyes on the Connecticut customers. "Look at 'em," he exclaimed. "They don't know how to pick. Bendin' like that straight from their hips, the damfools'll have a backache for the rest of the week. I tell 'em before they start, but it don't do no good. They oughta put one foot for'ard a little, and then sort of squat. That way's easier and it don't break your back."

Joe Lavalley was disgusted. He spat on the dry road. A small cloud of dust stirred up in the rut. "God, they's ignorant fools! When you've had to dig your eats from the dirt as long as I have you learn to be good to your back. You got only one back. It's got to last a long time. Millie learned. That's my wife. She'd never been on a farm till she married with me. Mill people, her folks were. Her, too. From Montreal. My folks, now they came from Canada, too. St. Jean. They 3 been farmers as far back as I know. Not big, rich farmers. They allus had too many mouths to feed. But they'd eat good. Everything 'cept their clothes come right off the farm.

"It was my old man got the bug to come to Vermont. 'Twas round '21, just before the big granite strike in Barre. Lots of French farmers was comin' down round that time. Word went round they wasn't doin' so bad. Well, right then the farm wasn't doin' so good. For a couple of years the old man had been prickin' up his ears every time he heard of a good place to move to. There was too many of us on that farm. We slept three and four together and fought like hell all the time. Let's see, fourteen there was and the house just big enough for five. My aunt and uncle and their three kids. My father and mother and five

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of us. My grandfather and grandmother. We coulda stood the bein' jammed in, it was the pickin' and fightin' all the time. My Uncle Joe'd got a job off the farm, workin' for a furrier in town. Every pay day he's give the grandfather a little cash. Livin' as we did off the farm we didn't see much money. That little bit of cash kinda turned my grandfather's head, he got to favorin' Uncle Joe. Yup, I was named after him. It made no difference that my old man worked off twice as much and more than what my Uncle turned over to the old folks. He couldn't see it. All he could see was that cash. Come the time when my father and mother was ousted 4 from their room (two windows it had) and put in my uncle's room. My aunt needed it, the old folks said, to have her third young one in. Though the other room'd been good enough for her first two. Come the time when us young ones was made to do the harder chores, leavin' the easy ones for the cousins. That's when the old man made up his mind. 'Come on,' he said, 'we're goin' to Vermont.' And we did. 'Twas the first time any of us young ones'd been in a train. Most twenty years ago. I remember the old man sayin' to my mother while he was pilin' us in the train, 'Well, Flora, we can't blame the old man too much. He never had much money to rattle in his pants. Poor folks ain't to be blamed in the head when they get moneyed all of a sudden.'

"Up there in our country the farms ain't too close together. Where they all chip in and make their livin' off the ground, the boys grow up and marry and they keep right on workin' there, most of 'em. Just put as double bed in the bedroom and a pair of new curtains, that's all. I know farmers up there keepin' four sons, and each with a wife and kids. Seen it done 'round here, too, not so much. Up Hall's Brook outside Barre. Three fam'lies livin' with the old man. There'd been two more a few years back. But the old man give 'em each a corner of the pasture and they up and built for themselves. They's only six families now in Hall's Brook, not countin' th' old man." 5 The Connecticut couple were leaving the berry field. The man carried the baskets. Two of them. The woman smiled faintly an she passed Joe on her way to the trailer. In a few minutes she returned with empty baskets. "Here," she said to Joe, "use them again." Joe Lavalley called[.?] "Hope to see you again," and tamped a pipeful of tobacco.

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He shifted over to the shady porch where bean vines had already twined half way up their string supports. "Stonecuttin'?" he drawled. "Hell, sure I've done stonecuttin'. Not much. But enough. They's dam few laborers pop into Barre or Montpelier that don't get a taste of stonecuttin' some time or other - I mean them that ain't already got jobs waitin' for 'em when they get here. The old man tried it. I did. Never got higher than packer and pick-up man, but that was enough for me. Rather have my hands in good rich dirt than in stone dust. You get a livin' from one, and a killin' from the other. I seen it lotta times. So 's quick as I could get out, I got out. Got a job here with Millie's boss. Farmhand I was. Got dam little pay, but plenty of good eats.

"Millie'd come three miles twice a week, from Barre, to help with the house work. That's how I come to know her. I'd been here less'n a year when we got married. The farmer here said he could use her every day if she stayed. We figured it was a good thing. Put both our pay together and it was pretty good. The boss didn't 6 live very long after his wife died. The farm went to a nephew down Brattleboro way. Sold it to us cheap, on easy payments. It's all ours now, such as 'tis. Needs paintin' and plenty of repairs. We can't afford that. But we eat good. Yessir. That's all that counts. And I guess the old roof'll hang on 'till Millie and me kick off.

"The kids're all married. Married kinda young. Just three we got. Three girls. Only one of 'em had brains to marry a farmer. I allus tell her, 'Mary, you may not have the fancy clothes Emma and Irene got, but, by God, you'll have plenty to eat, and nobody else's leavin's.

"We got a niece with us. She's a big help to Millie. Her folks're in Barre. She got in a mess there a year ago with a fellow works in a grocery store. Wasn't makin' enough to marry her, he says, but he'd be willin' to pay a doctor to fix her up. She was so scairt and feelin' low that she let him take her to the doctor's house. But she come to then, wouldn't let the old fool touch her. After a while Judy got 'shamed to show her face in town. She had her baby down country and left it there to be 'dopted.

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"The granite business's pretty near shot t'hell 'round here, so they say. There was a time when you wouldn't see any of 'em loafin' an' walkin' the streets like they are now. The business's all changed. Was 7 the time when everybody was granite crazy. Salesmen'd go out - I don't mean on the road like they do today- I mean from house to house, like peddlers. Tryin' to sell their monuments and markers.

"Was one came up here years ago. Slick with his tongue, he was. Millie was upstairs waitin' to have the second girl, Mary. Expectin' to have it any time when this damn salesman walks in. Showed me all kinds of memorials. Drawin's they were. No prices on 'em. I figured they'd charge accordin' to the size of the customer's pocketbook. I told him I wasn't interested, but he talked on 'bout how a man should get his own memorial when he can, seein' maybe no one else'll bother after you're gone. He dug out drawin' after drawin'. Wasn't any stoppin' that fella. He picks out a small one he figures I can afford. It just stands two feet high with grape vines over the top of it. 'Grape vines are nice,' he says. 'They stand for faith and bein' fruitful. Most of the best high priced stones got grape vines now.'

"Well, I got to thinkin' 'bout Millie upstairs sick and waitin', I grabbed those pictures and stuffed 'em in his hands any which way. Listen, I said, get those damn pictures and that slick tongue of yours off'm my farm. You don't need faith when you're dead, and how in hell you ganna be fruitful when you're stiff as a beanpole under six feet of dirt?"